

May 16, 2007

## EMPRESS OF THE NORTH GROUNDING

### MAYDAY RESPONSE

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007 the 2nd mate awakened me at 0130 and informed that The Empress of the North had gone aground on Hanus Reef at the North end of Chatham Strait and was sending out a Mayday request for assistance. I had the mate contact Juneau USCG to see if they wanted our assistance. They requested we respond to Mayday request from Empress of the North. We had just gone past the Sisters in Icy Strait so we turned and began to head back to the Hanus Reef area. I got dressed and came to the bridge and began to monitor the VHF radio traffic. During our return the USCG continued to ask for updated ETA to the scene, and we were able to monitor the conversation between the USCG and The Empress of the North. The Captain indicated they had water in 3 compartments between their double bottoms, but were not taking water into the main compartments in the ship. He had about a 6 to 8 degree list to starboard and had launched all life rafts but was not putting passengers in them but was asking for any vessels in the area to assist in getting passengers off the vessel.

I awakened the passengers and crew at approximately 0245 and explained the situation and asked passengers to remain in their rooms, as we would be taking people aboard off the Empress. The captain aboard the Empress asked that I come along his Port side as he was listing to Starboard. We were on scene at 0314, which was North of Hanus reef approximately a mile and a half to 2 miles, and positioned our vessel to come alongside his Port side with our bow facing the same direction as his bow. They had several life rafts tied to the railings off his bow. We asked that they be moved and were told to simply push them out of the way by a crew member who was requesting we line up our top deck with an opening in their railing the next deck above their main deck. He appeared to be an officer but did not have any bars showing as he was dressed in a company orange float coat. I again asked that they pull the rafts out of the way and was told they did not have the manpower. I decided to proceed so we went in alongside and lined up the SOC with their gate. During this evolution I had to lay the bow of the SOC on their life rafts and while tying up I heard the bow thruster change pitch in sound so I assumed I had pulled something into it but could see nothing, so immediately stopped using it. We were tied alongside at 0329 and they began to lower a gangway from their upper deck down to our 400 deck. I tried to contact Kristian Strinsky but the Sat phone had no reception, and did not think the cell phone was working until I saw a crewmember on the Empress walk by on their deck talking on a cell phone.

I was able to contact Kristian and explained what was going on. They had 281 passengers aboard less some who had been taken off on a small fishing vessel. The USCG asked that I take as many aboard as I felt was safe and they waived the COI regulations as I was in contact with a chopper on scene circling the vessel and the Coast Guard Cutter Liberty. We had their gangway secured and began to take passengers aboard and decided to take 50 and see how this affected our vessel. It appeared from all

information I had that the Empress was not in danger of sinking. We boarded 4 people in wheel chairs and 5 who were not able to walk without assistance, until we had 52 aboard. Had the Empress begun to sink I would have taken as many as possible to save lives. The Coast Guard then asked if we would move off from the Empress so other vessels could get in, so we took lines aboard at 0427 and moved a safe distance away. The Tug Tiger was standing by with a fuel barge alongside so they pushed up against the Starboard side of the Empress and the Coast Guard vessel Liberty came in alongside on the Empresses Port side and they took the remaining passengers off the vessel.

We were drifting in the area and at approximately 0518 the SOE arrived and came over near our vessel, but at that time everyone but the crew had been removed from the Empress. The Alaska passenger ferry Columbia was diverted to the scene around 0530 and the Liberty went alongside her Port side and began unloading passengers through the Auto/Cargo door on the Columbia at 0558. One of the 30 plus foot self righting Coast Guard vessels arrived on scene and began taking passengers off the fuel barge and transferring them to the Liberty that was tied off on the Columbia. They began to take our passengers off at 0735 to the Liberty. We had 4 people in wheel chairs on our upper deck that we wrapped in blankets and they had to be carried down by the crew to go out our Port cargo door onto the coast guard vessel. We feed all the passengers off the Empress and ran out of eggs for our passengers, but had other food for them. Our crew handled this whole incident perfectly with the greatest professionalism at all times. The passengers where kept under control so there was never any sign of panic or distress, other than the obvious stress of the situation at hand. All passengers from the Empress had PFD's on which were taken off when they were below in the Lounge and neatly stacked for them to don when they departed our vessel. When they boarded the Coast Guard boat for transfer they again were placed in PFD's and assisted aboard across our gangway plank, which was placed between our two vessels so people could safely step across and be helped aboard by both crews. We transferred all 52 passengers off the vessel and were dismissed by the USCG at 0822 when we began our trip to Glacier Bay.

During this time I was in touch with our office and the Park Rangers supervisor who gave me the name of a diver. We had discovered that we had pulled a sea anchor from a life raft into the bow thruster that we could not see when going alongside. I got the name of a local diver and we obtained permission to come to the Bartlett Cove dock to have a diver come to the vessel and remove the sea anchor with the assistance of the office in Seattle and at Bartlett Cove. We arrived at Bartlett Cove at about 1230 and were greeted by several Park Rangers who took our guests ashore for hikes in the area after lunch. Alastair and our EL's kept our passenger informed about the progress of events at all times and answered all the concerns that may have come up. The guests were disappointed that they could not get into Glacier Bay, but understood. I was told company officials would meet and discussed a plan of action, which Alastair and I implemented later in the day at the request of Bryce Brockway. The guests were all given letters signed by Jeff Krida expressing our regrets and offering a \$200 dollar credit for future trips and an open bar for social hour. All the guests thought this was a very generous offer and it would appear many are going to come back again and take advantage of this. I spoke to the guests of the tradition of coming to the aid of vessels in distress and

thanked everyone for their cooperation. The guests had nothing but high praise for the actions of the crew during this whole ordeal. Many guests even packed their clothes so they would be able to offer space to any passengers off the Empress if it was needed.

We were fortunate that the weather was calm during this whole event so the transfer of passengers aboard all the vessels went smoothly. In the end the Empress left under her own power with her crew aboard for Juneau. The SOE who had been dismissed shortly after she arrived was asked to turn back and escort the Empress until a tug could arrive from Juneau to escort her the rest of the way. I can only extend the highest praise to all crewmembers aboard for the professional way this whole incident was handled.

Captain Doane Brodie

Spirit of Columbia